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AN INQUIRY INTO HUMOR

What a compensation balance is to a timepiece Humor is to the mind. To each is delegated the correction of such extravagances as may be indulged in by either mechanism through certain undue variations of temperature, atmospheric or mental. In fact, I think he must have been something of a humorist himself who by that simple little device caused both extremes of heat and cold each to nullify its own ill effects, so that the timepiece might fulfill its destiny and keep time.

The *raison d'être* of the humorous lies in the fact of such irregularities of judgment and conduct, and in the perception of these Humor itself is engendered. Things are for the time hopelessly disordered, misfitted, or inappropriate, and if the disorder does not reach far enough down to affect the deeper compensation balances of Pity or Wrath, a pleasurable excitement begins in the cerebral cells, which is often communicated to the sympathetic system, and a species of abdominal convulsions and laryngeal contractions and relaxations then results, accompanied by a succession of emitted sounds, sometimes musical, though often startling. This phenomenon is frequently followed by an uncontrollable impulse to relate the disordered fact to the next person one meets, sometimes to observe in another, sometimes to excite in unison, the abdominal convulsions recorded above.

It would prove, no doubt, an interesting inquiry as to whether Humor, a quality so nearly coextensive with the human race — except for some interesting examples I shall note later — does not reach down into the lower levels of animal life as well. Physiology has studied such types of existence pretty carefully in recent years, and in the workings of these less specialized brains has discovered much that is surprising. Instinct, with which the philosopher used contemptuously to dismiss the entire matter, has proved wholly inadequate to the facts on closer inspection, and if thought processes, however simple, are to be allowed at all to these types of rudimentary intelligence, Humor, coterminous as it is with thought, must, I believe, go

with this. Casual observation is almost sufficient to establish it; and truly, the minimum of intelligence allowed by the psychologist to the minor animal kingdom would be ample to perpetrate or appreciate much of what passes for Humor among us, provided it were reducible to terms of such existences—the impossibility of which, perhaps, is a fortunate matter for these less noble creatures. But this inquiry, however interesting, would lead me beyond my intention.

It is, then, in the amazing or startling deviations from the normal, the appropriate, that Humor finds its ground. He, therefore, who has the keenest perception of the appropriate, provided he is not a dyspeptic, or is otherwise soured, is the natural humorist. Yet though I am using the term inappropriate to cover generally what is the lawful prey of Humor, an absolute inappropriateness does not excite mirth. The point of the matter must be at the same time both appropriate and inappropriate, and it is the delicate balance of these which gives quality to the jest. To illustrate with an antique:

Two Cockney footpads having learned that a certain Right Noble Lord went regularly at half past nine on a certain night each week to his club to play cards, and that on these occasions he usually carried a large sum of money with him, decided to relieve him of it if they could. At nine o'clock, therefore, they posted themselves at a dark corner on the route travelled by his Lordship.

"Now Joe," said the other, "Hi will 'old 'im, while you goes through 'im."

"Hall right, Bill," returned Joe; and they waited in silence.

Half past nine o'clock came, but no Lord. Ten, and then half past ten, and then eleven.

"Joe," said Bill.

"Wot's hup, Bill?" was the reply.

"Hi 'ope nothing 'as 'appened to 'is Lordship."

The balance is here effected between Bill's appropriate concern for his Lordship and its entire inappropriateness under the circumstances, both of which are carried out by the single observation. A single illustration cannot well cover the entire field, varied as it is, but some such duplicity of language, char-

acter, or circumstance seems fundamental to Humor of whatever type.

Humor is Nature's balance effecting sanity of judgment and conduct. It is the dissipator par excellence of mental fogs and obfuscations which cause objects to be presented in a false perspective; and it is the uncompromising foe to egotism, incapacity, and shams. In the cemetery of spooks, gigantic egos, and other abortions, the extinction of these prodigies will be found oftener credited to Humor than to the swords of all the Paladins, ancient or modern. What impregnable citadels, what colossal ambitions have not within the experience of us all crumbled into empty air at the touch of Humor.

Human nature has a marvellous resistant and recuperative power in the case of violent assaults on it or its ideas. The instinct of self-preservation is then supreme. Existence itself seems to be threatened. On such occasions ideas which are in reality no integral part of life, which time and common sense would have dissipated, take the firmest and tensest grip, and batter at them as one will, the effect is only to knot them firmer and faster. To destroy them now is to destroy the individual, the impossibility of which under our modern codes is often a matter of regret. But Humor's method is different, and vastly more effective. At its light stroke, as by magic, the entire foundation grows all insecure. One is uncertain then what to rely on, or what one is standing on; or it may be seen that there is no foundation whatever in reason for one's carefully reared superstructure, which is then relegated, with laughter or with tears, according to temperament, to the limbo of collapsed bubbles, impossible freaks, and unrealities.

Fortunate is he whose false position or distorted vision has been made clear by a humorous perception of its falsity springing from within, instead of being under the unpleasant necessity of having the truth forced upon his consciousness from without. This indeed is a very remarkable feature of the mechanism of Humor, and a very important factor in its corrective value; for while this quality is so far sought and so keenly prized by humanity, yet Nature has caused the occasion of the mirth to resent the situation strongly, and he is com-

monly exceedingly careful thereafter not to subject himself to the same point of Humor. The further fact likewise deserves to be carefully noted about this remarkable quality, that people are far quicker at detecting humorous values in others than in themselves, which is quite the reverse of their attitude in moral and intellectual values. Yet in this we observe a wise provision of Nature for the continuance of abundant Humor in the world. Indeed, the regulation of ideas and conduct cannot be left to the individual. These are in constant need of purgation — not of the gentle sort that men usually administer to themselves, but drastic and thorough purgatives administered from without; for it is indeed largely by purgation that Nature works, that being selected for further evolutionary purposes which can withstand the processes whereby waste matter is disposed of. I have made no account here of those who detect in themselves non-existent powers of humorous perception and expression. This is an error of the judgment, to be repented of sometimes by the individual, but oftener by society.

Humor is in no wise constructive. It is essentially destructive in character. It is content merely to shatter, and to leave all processes of reconstruction to other faculties. Without bounds it would quickly produce chaos, so powerful is its disintegrating force, and then, I presume, would proceed to find in chaos itself much matter for mirth. This ability to subsist and thrive under almost all conditions, rendering them, or at least much of them, unsatisfactory or impossible, is one of the most distinctive traits of this quality. It must therefore be so circumscribed and limited in its workings that anarchy will not result. These limits are in a sense vague, yet in another sense are most determinate and effective. The deepest of truths and the purest of emotions wear a dignity about them in the presence of which Humor cannot exist; and should anyone be so blind as to their real nature as to venture into their presence with a jest, the intrusion, if a real intrusion, is keenly resented by humanity. It is then not Humor but indignity, awaking anger perhaps, or contempt, or pity for the perpetrator of the jest.

But we must be somewhat careful here. These truths must

not only be the deepest, and these emotions the purest, but they must wear such an expression as is in keeping with their lofty character. There must be nothing freakish or abnormal or inappropriate in this expression, else it at once becomes a lawful mark for Humor. It is not the truth in its real character which is then being assailed, but the faulty expression of it. Yet to many, the truth and the particular guise one has discovered it to wear when he has apprehended it, are so entirely coterminous and synonymous, that much confusion has resulted in the world among those who have not been able to recognize this fundamental distinction. In consequence, truth has often suffered much temporary obscurity and discredit when one whose keen instinct for the appropriate has been able to render some aspect of truth ludicrous, thereby throwing it into disrepute. And, *per contra*, the champions of this particular dogma or doctrine have never failed on such occasions to revile such a character as an iconoclast, a libeler, and a blasphemer of gods and men. But on the analysis of time, the truth, as ever, will be found to be uninjured, and the havoc to have been wrought merely on the inadequate expression in which it was existing. Illustrations in point may readily be adduced from pretty much any chapter in the history of religious thought.

In its subjective aspect Humor is hardly less interesting than in the work it accomplishes through ultimately detaching the inconsequential from that of consequence. It is a marvellous revealer of character both individual and national. Indeed, by their humor ye shall know them. "Wine wears no breeches," says an old Italian proverb. Nor does Humor by choice; and if one would gauge with reasonable accuracy the angle at which any character is inclined toward the grosser side of human nature, let such an inquirer make his observation when Humor is disporting itself on an occasion such as does not demand the tribute to convention mentioned by the Italian sage. He will be likely to learn the truth. Nor indeed should I think an estimate formed of national character to be a satisfactory or reliable conception, if to its formation was not contributed a careful study of the humor of that people. There is often more of unconscious self-revelation in a few stray fragments of a humorous

character than in whole tomes of ambitious, and therefore, usually, self-conscious stuff.

It would appear that the humorist has, more than anyone else in the world, a wider and more friendly audience, consisting as it does of high and low, rich and poor, all ready and anxious to laugh with him. Another has to win his audience to sympathy or interest, being frequently, and often justly suspected of some ulterior personal motive, or of being the vessel of some truth, which, however true, is liable to create such an unrest in the aggregation of ideas representing the daily existence of the average citizen as will require a general, or even a very considerable, readjustment of these, a situation which the average citizen is loath to encounter. But the humorist is never credited with an ulterior motive, even though this occasionally does develop. His audience is in full sympathy with him from the start, and he must be woefully lacking in diplomacy, or humor, if he fails to preserve this accord.

More than any other talent Humor can render one *persona grata*, provided the humor is of a highly impersonal type. When it develops a strong personal flavor it can render the humorist *persona non grata* about as readily as any defect in the catalogue of Aristotle. It is usually then classified as a vice by those who are its object, occasionally as an Eighth Deadly Sin, while poor Southey writhing under his humorous castigation by Lord Byron was led seriously to consider whether that irreverent youth was not an incarnation of Beelzebub and none other. The personal sentiments of Euripides concerning Aristophanes have not been preserved, but likely enough they were a pagan duplicate of those of the Laureate of the Lakes concerning Lord Byron.

All of which is not surprising, considering the reluctance of humanity to play leading rôles in unconscious comedy. There are many who resent it more than they would a stab from the dark, while in the case of that much lauded class, the Good Humored, these on an intimate analysis will be found to show more wrinkles in their self composure, and more matter for penitence, through having inadvertently furnished themselves as marks for Humor, than is generally supposed. Yet it must

be admitted that he who is most offended at occasions of the sort will be found to carry an unusually large and thriving ego in his cosmos.

But often much moral cowardice develops out of a too serious regard of humorous assaults. It is natural enough to dislike being rendered conspicuous or absurd, but when this dislike, passing reasonable grounds, becomes a positive obsession or fear, continually obtruding itself into conduct, there is little in human nature that is more contemptible; for he who has surrendered himself to such an obsession has to all intents surrendered not only his sense of moral obligation but his personal freedom of action. Equipose and obedience to the dictates of the reason in the face of such conditions frequently call for a considerable exercise of will, varying according to temperament and circumstances, for there is a vast difference between physical and moral courage, some men being at small concern for the gravest of physical disasters, yet in the face of ridicule they are subject to an utter paralysis or to the most incontinent and disgraceful rout.

As to the humorist proper, I am in doubt whether to consider his a happy lot or not. It is difficult, however, regarding as he does so constantly the foibles, errors, incapacities, and inconclusive efforts of humanity, to see how he should finally escape becoming either a satirist, or a man of large and generous sympathies, tolerant, and compassionate beyond the compassion commonly accorded to man.

An overplus of the humorous faculty may prove a personal defect, tending toward the blunting of one's sensibilities in the direction of the deeper and soberer currents of human thought and feeling, and thus rendering one not only an unreliable critic, but sometimes an object of concern to one's friends. But to recur to Aristotle's balance again. Though the excess of this quality may sometimes prove injurious, and often undesirable, the defect is beyond all hope: the politician without his graft, the mariner without his compass, the man without humor. For lacking these, none of the three can assert with any degree of certainty either his actual whereabouts or entertain any confidence concerning what port his ship will ultimately reach. A

man without religion can be indoctrinated, a man without mental skill can be trained, but a man without humor,—who can help him?

The judgments of such a man are worthy of the gravest distrust, for with an insidious gravity and assurance he will evoke conclusions from premises that would awake laughter along the Styx, but which in him have aroused never a suspicion of their real character. Such men should not be regarded merely with the humorous compassion usually accorded them; they are really dangerous characters, a fact which even a casual survey of the history of human thought should establish. It is not too much, perhaps, to say that there has been more that has proved disastrous resulting from a lack of humorous perception than from any single other deficiency in the range of human experience. It is the habit of Nature to balance a deficit of one quality with a generous profusion of another; and when, as has sometimes happened, a deficiency in humor has been joined with large ambitions,—

“The courage never to submit or yield,
And what is else not to be overcome,”—

the gods have sat by the footprints of such men, weeping.

Whether or not there are recorded any instances of the total absence of the humorous faculty, I am unaware, yet certainly it has been known to exist in infinitesimal proportions. But its entire absence would not be so dangerous as its extreme deficiency, for the former would probably be known for a prodigy, while the latter is extremely difficult for men to gauge truly both in its real nature and in its effects. They will ascribe a disordered or a hopelessly inadequate situation to pretty much any cause sooner than this, whereas, if this be the inherent defect, there is no leader whom humanity should have greater cause to dread. For it should be borne in mind that the possession of sufficient humor is subject after all to an extremely relative standard; for while a man may possess humor enough to cope with the ordinary situations of daily life, when he undertakes to deal with ideas elevating him above this level, or with circumstances or characters calling for a considerable exercise of judgment, his humor may then become hopelessly inadequate to his

needs. Black is then white, and white black, and the mirages of the desert are often safer and more trusty guides than the phantasmagoria which then develop. To diagnose such a deficiency frequently calls for an exercise of the rarest penetration and skill; but the malady does exist, and through its very speciousness is capable of working dire havoc. A man's humor should therefore equal his entire mental range.

But there are men, as I have said, who show not only an average capacity and sometimes more than an average capacity at retailing humorous situations recognized by others, but also some independent discernment of these on their own part. It is easy to be lulled into a sense of false security in the case of such a character. Yet by some startlingly inappropriate jest, pitifully wide of its mark, the deficiency will reveal itself. The trouble then is, that though the cloven hoof is before them, men fail to realize how deeply this bears on all other matters pertaining to the reasoning powers and the judgment of such a man. The marvel then should be, not the inappropriateness of the jest itself, but the mental unsoundness of the man that gave it birth. Therefore, if one is wise let him beware of the judgments of that man whose humor rings false.

Historically, humor, like all else, shows periods of ebb and flood. It has been most active and of a more convincing quality at times when serious thought has been most active, possibly as a provision of Nature to prevent the soaring thought from detaching itself completely from its basis in common sense. Thus we find the age of the great Grecian philosophers and tragedians containing its Aristophanes, that of Corneille, Racine, and Pascal, its Molière, while in our own Elizabethan age the balance appears to have been most wonderfully effected in the person of the single man, Shakespeare. Comedy, however, continues to subsist and thrive long after the constructive energy which has produced great tragedy, philosophy, etc., has exhausted itself.

In itself Humor is not choice in its diet. It feeds on whatever it finds lodgment on, being in a sense a sort of parasitic growth. In the absence of great positive material, it busies itself with the less, for there are always absurdities of one sort or

another for it to destroy. It is sometimes retiring, and sometimes bold, or again, mercurial, saturnine, or jovial; sometimes for long periods of time it has been busier below than above the navel, when self-preservation combined with common decency has at length compelled it to elevate its shafts. Indeed, even in such periods as the English Restoration, Humor still abounds for those who can assimilate what beguiled the fancy of Nell Gwynn and the Stuart lords; for inappropriateness exists independently of morals and good taste, though these are the determining factors whether it shall be legitimized into current use.

But more than all else, Humor seems to represent the mass, the multitude, the great body of the general public, and as such it is essentially democratic. In its character of a leveller, in its protest against all that is eccentric, irregular, or of unusual or unaccustomed proportions, in its suspicion of all that it cannot at once understand, in its character, not of a foe to intellectual progress, but rather of a vast inertia-like force which each fresh step forward is obliged to reckon with, in its rôle of a reviler, in its not infrequent coarseness, in its persistent reference of all problems to hard practical utility rather than to intellectual or moral gauges, in all this the features of the great Demos are unmistakable.

To narrow this down to two literary types for definiteness of illustration: Comedy, then, well represents the democratic, and Tragedy the aristocratic elements of man's nature — I use the term 'aristocratic' in the widest possible sense. Tragedy elevates the individual, Comedy through its strenuous conservatism would level him; for democracy, so far as ideas are concerned, is the great conservative force of the world. The motive of Tragedy is the conflict of intellectual or moral principles of a lofty, and frequently, of a severe type. Comedy can tolerate neither severity nor loftiness of motive. Tragedy explores the deeps of the deepest emotions, but that is ground which Comedy dares not draw too nigh.

Tragedy creates unrest. It is a species of spiritual earthquake, upsetting the complacent routine of daily existence, and in this is eminently useful, since a certain readjustment of our

normal ideas and feelings must follow, and much that is trifling and commonplace is apt, temporarily at least, to disappear. Without such occasional irruptions into the mass of ideas which represents our routine life, stagnation is certain to result. Comedy, on the contrary, effects no such unrest. It creates an individual complacency and self-satisfaction flattering the judgment and perception of its audience, since a comic audience is always superior to the situation or characters involved. If this relation did not exist, Comedy could not exist. In Tragedy the reverse is true. Its characters are either in general stature, or intensity of emotion, or in both, superior to its audience. Each of these literary types tends ultimately to repose, but of an utterly different character; Comedy through smiles to complacency, Tragedy to serenity through storms. The genius of Tragedy is the soul at strife; that of Comedy, the intellect at play.

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